

I shouldn't tell you this but . . .



G IS FOR GOSSIP

"You've been on the phone to your sister for half an hour; what on earth do you talk about?" "Oh, just family gossip." Most of us enjoy a good gossip. The words "I shouldn't really tell you this, but" make us perk up. So it's not surprising that, according to recent research, two thirds of all conversation is gossip. Being, apparently, the equivalent of "social grooming" among primates, it is essential to our social, psychological and physical wellbeing. So that's all right, then. We need feel no shame in chatting about how Aunt Janet looked like mutton dressed as lamb at Veronica's wedding, or why Cousin Bill was in a bar with a blonde at lunchtime. On the contrary, our chat serves the same useful purpose as picking imaginary fleas out of each other's fur does for chimpanzees. We are bonding with each other and keeping the relationships of our wider group of family and friends in good repair. Even gossip between partners,

which starts routinely "So how was your day?" is a valuable antidote to the pressures of the workplace.

The gossip-based relationships that thrived in small communities in the past have been threatened by today's fragmented, fast-paced life, but it seems that mobile phones have come to the rescue.

BT Cellnet describes them as "the new garden fence", providing opportunities for long-distance gossip, giving family members a warm feeling that they are in touch. There is, of course, a downside. Mischief-making gossip can seep through a family like poison, turning people against each other. But, perhaps surprisingly, most gossip is not malicious. It is about who said what to whom, who they are going out with, how much they paid for their house, car or new shoes, and whether we approve of their choices. This easy-going kind of gossip can give less confident family members useful clues as to what behaviour is acceptable in their group.

Gossip can also bridge the generation gap, grandparents playing their part as an appreciative audience for teenagers bursting with news about which boy dumped which girl at school.

To read Jane's columns visit timesonline.co.uk/health/features/goodgranny.com

The Good Granny's advice



■ Never betray someone else's secret. Even if you swear the receiver to silence, it is wrong.

■ Do keep in touch with distant family members by ringing them "for a gossip".

■ Refuse to listen to malicious gossip. If that is more than you can bear,

at least refrain from passing it on.

■ Hone your communication skills by making your gossip as entertaining as possible.

■ Make a special effort to share the latest gossip with house-bound or otherwise needy family members.

JANE FEARNLEY-WHITTINGSTALL

Chips are down for women

Online gambling is a magnet for female flutterers, but Celia Dodd sees a growing band of addicts among the lucky ladies



Eliza Burnett, a 29-year-old publisher from Fulham, southwest London, is wild about poker. She plays online five times a week and twice a week in clubs or casinos. "I am quite addicted," she laughs, "but it's purely for fun. It's never about the money; it's about winning. I get a massive adrenalin buzz from it. I win fairly consistently and I play for relatively small stakes, £5 to £10. The most I have won in a cash game is £300; it was so exciting that I felt my heart was about to jump out."

Burnett, a bespectacled non-drinker, could not be further from the James Bond stereotype of women in casinos — all deep cleavages and lipgloss. She is one of the new generation who doesn't see why gambling, and online poker in particular, should be a male preserve. "I started when I was about 21 and my boyfriend played in a club in Chelsea. The more I watched, the more I wanted to play, so I joined in. I was the only girl and they were happy to let me play as long as they won most of the time. Then about four years later I found myself on an internet poker site and I got hooked."

Women make up two thirds of players on Virgin's online casino sites and comprise a third of its online poker players. Not everyone is a fan, not least the American Senate, which this week voted to ban online gambling in the US. One senator said it was like injecting drugs without needles: "Just click on the mouse and lose your house." The UK gambling charity Gam-

Eliza Burnett: happy to give the men a run for their money

care, which is funded by the gambling industry, says that about a quarter of the gambling addicts who use its online message forum are women.

"Female gambling has definitely risen over the past 15 years and it's continuing to rise," says Mark Griffiths, Professor of Gambling Studies at Nottingham Trent University. "I estimate that in 20 years' time the number of women gambling will be the same as the number of men. I also expect to see a significant increase in the number of women problem gamblers." The last national survey, in 2000, found that only 0.2 per cent of women had a gambling problem, and that male problem gamblers outnumbered females by three to one. That's likely to change, says Professor Griffiths: "At the moment we have the lowest gambling problem rates in the Western world, with just under 1 per cent of the adult population affected. But we are about to go through a huge cultural shift."

Online gambling seems a particularly female-friendly conduit; you don't have to join a casino or walk into an intimidating male-dominated betting shop. Online sites are advertised on television and Handbag.com; fruit machines and scratchcards are everywhere. You can even bet on the things that women are supposed to care about, such as who gets evicted from *Big Brother*. In the wake of the American crack-down, the future of Britain's rapidly growing online gaming industry may be uncertain, but

internet gambling has enabled women to discover and to develop their talent for card games (see panel, top right).

And women like Burnett are giving gambling a new respectability. She caused a stir last year when she was invited to the Women of the Year lunch. And last month the journalist Victoria Coren became the first woman to win the London leg of the European Poker Tour, one of the three biggest poker tournaments in the world, and grabbed a £500,000 pot in the process.

Burnett, who grew so keen that she got a job editing a poker magazine and has written a guide for women players, *Girls' Guide to Poker* (to be published by Hamlyn next July, £6.99), says: "I think that women can play just as well as, and often even better than, men because they don't have the ego thing. And most girls are more patient."

Where to get help

- Gamblers Anonymous helpline, 08700 508880; www.gamblersanonymous.org.uk
- GamCare supports problem gamblers and their families. It offers counselling, an online message forum and a helpline, 0845 6000133; www.gamcare.co.uk

Dr John Nicholson, a business psychologist and the author of *Men and Women: How Different Are They?* (OUP), says: "Historically women didn't like gambling because they were too realistic to expect to win. It was expensive, risky, and it wasn't socially acceptable. Now that they have more disposable income there may be a need to spend whatever leisure time they have more intensely, and gambling has that element of danger. But it may simply be that women are enjoying cocking a snook."

Of course, many women would rather get the instant buzz and escapism offered by games of chance than to spend time boning up

LOUISA LOST £7,000 IN EIGHT MONTHS' BETTING

Clark stopped going to casinos when she moved to London to work in banking; she wasn't hooked on gambling and she says she didn't miss it. But within a few years she had developed a surprising addiction to fruit machines. She lost £7,000 in 18 months, playing every evening.

"It looks so mindless, but when you're playing it is strangely compelling. I never played to win. I could tell if the machine wasn't going to pay out, but I would still play. I just enjoyed the sensation. Perhaps the mindlessness of it was part of the appeal."

Although she believes she has an addictive personality, she says her addiction was simply because fruit machines were so accessible. "It started when I met someone who spent a lot of time in pubs," she says. "I found it a bit boring, so I'd disappear for an hour and a half to play a fruit machine. It quickly became a daily routine. At one stage, when I was working as a temp, I would go into the local pub in my lunch break. I must have looked ridiculous, a woman in a suit playing a fruit machine in an old man's pub. I

felt totally out of place. Then one Christmas I found myself playing for over an hour when I stopped at a service station for petrol.

"That made me stop and think, 'What on earth are you doing? You're an intelligent person'. It wasn't very ladylike; in fact, it was pretty seedy and it didn't make me feel very good about myself. Retrospectively, I feel like an idiot. What else could I have bought with that money or done with that time? What's extraordinary is that it was like play money; it never felt like I was losing thousands of pounds."

Clark played her last machine two years ago, hitting a triple jackpot and winning £75. She overcame her addiction through sheer willpower. "That last win was an incredible buzz," she says. "But I made a pact with my boyfriend that if I ever touched another fruit machine I'd have to run the London Marathon, which is a pretty horrific thought. It was the only way to get me to stop. I still look at fruit machines and think, 'I'd love to play and no one need know'. The trouble is they're in almost every pub, whereas going to a casino requires more organisation."

Of course, giving up gambling often requires much more than self-control. There are plenty of sad tales of women whose lives have been shattered by losing six-figure sums in a matter of months.

Yet, according to GamCare, many women are reluctant to seek help, perhaps because of the stigma attached.

Holding all the cards

Why women have a psychological advantage at the card table

The psychologist Dr John Nicholson, the author of *Men & Women: How Different Are They?* says: "Although many women prefer to play online because they tend to underestimate their capabilities, they have psychological traits that make them do well in face-to-face games. For example, there's evidence that women are better judges of people and at reading social signals, which is particularly useful in poker. Women are also better at multi-tasking. At a card table, the ability to do several things at once and stay focused is key to success."

Women also deal better with the reality of gambling, he says. "From a young age, men tend to exaggerate how well they're going to do. Women are less likely to overestimate their chances of winning."

Reality check

Realism also puts many women off gambling. What keeps bringing gamblers back is the pathetic conviction that this time it will be their turn to win. Their realism is linked to a lack of self-belief. Dr Paul Seager, a senior lecturer in psychology at the University of Central Lancashire, says: "In poker you have to have the self-confidence that you are equal to anyone else at the table."

Packing a punch

Although women are less aggressive than men, they are learning, says Dr Seager. "In poker, aggression means not being afraid of sticking your chips in with a less than premium hand. The successful women players are taking that on board."